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New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Syllabus JOUR-UA 204.004
MUSIC! FILM! TV! WRITING POP CULTURE
Summer 2024
Professor: Hope, Clover
T, TH 4PM - 7PM

To contact professor: [cgh213@nyu.edu]
Phone: []
Office hours: By appointment

Course Description

Writing about pop culture is a playground for radical thought, for exciting, often polarizing ideas on race, society, and how the fictional and fact-based entertainment we breathe intersects with real life. From reboots and reality TV to blockbusters and horror movies, from sitcoms and romcoms to the expansive landscape of minority-led Hollywood productions, from the latest Miley Cyrus album to Steve Lacy, there is no shortage of material to write about.

Learning Objectives

In this course, students will:

- Demonstrate awareness of journalism's core ethical values
- Write clear, accurate and engaging prose in an audience-appropriate manner
- Demonstrate critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
- Sharpen their critical skills and instincts
- Learn to write within a specific beat
- Brainstorm good, pitchable ideas and story angles
- Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives
- Brave the (internet) elements and learn to document pop culture, in the form of news blogs, reviews, interviews, criticism, and research
- Along the way they'll start to develop their own voice

Course Structure

Discussion, course readings, critical thinking exercises

Assignments are due by 5 p.m., without exception. You must meet this deadline. Assignments should be uploaded to the class Google Docs folder provided by professor. Assignments will be workshopped on Thursdays. There will also be weekly assigned readings. Class participation and attendance factor into the final grade. You're required to attend all classes and attendance does count. If you're present, you participate. If you're more than 10 minutes late more than once, this will affect your final grade.

The required text for the course is:

Zinsser, William (2016) *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Non-Fiction*. Harper Perennial.

An optional and recommended text is:

Associated Press (2018) *The Associated Press Stylebook 2018: and Briefing on Media Law (Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law)*. Basic Books.

Course Requirements

The goal of this course is to pitch and develop story ideas around culture, to sharpen reporting and critical skills, and write a series of music/movie/TV reviews, including a final long-form essay. Class participation, attendance, and assignment will be factored into grading. Be prepared to briefly discuss entertainment news of the week at the top of each class. Each class will also feature critical thinking exercises, during which we will watch, dissect, and critique music, movie and television clips as a group.

Grades

Your final grade will be based on your written assignments (80 percent) and class participation (20 percent). If you miss more than two classes, for whatever reason, you cannot get higher than a B in the class. This class functions as a team and to work effectively everyone must come to class prepared, hand in assignments on time, do the readings and fully participate.

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

Assignment #1 Due Thursday, July 11 (15 percent)

Find a piece of movie or TV criticism published online between January and July 2023. Deconstruct the essay via Google Doc comments. What is the thesis? What are the elements of criticism? How does the writer support the thesis? Be prepared to discuss in class.

Assignment #2 500-600 words Due Thursday, July 23 (20 percent)

Write a critical essay about a piece of entertainment that was released in 2024. This can be a movie of any type (indie, blockbuster, etc.), a piece of music (song, album, concert), or a television show (an episode, series, reality TV). The format must be in the form of an essay with a clear point of view about the subject and a thesis. This assignment will help you explore your critical voice and illustrate ways in which the entertainment we view sparks curiosity.

Assignment #3 100-150 words Due Tuesday, July 30 (20 percent)

Choose a song that was released in 2024. Consider the critical elements we discussed in class. Write a short blurb about the song.

Final Assignment 800-1,000 words Due Tuesday, August 6 (25 percent)

Write a critical essay about a piece of entertainment that was released in 2024. This can be a movie of any type (indie, blockbuster, etc.), a piece of music (song, album, concert), or a television show (an episode, series, reality TV). The format must be in the form of an essay with a clear point of view about the subject and a thesis.

WEEK 1

7/9/24 - Overview of cultural criticism and introduction to entertainment writing

What does it mean to cover culture? What does entertainment and culture writing entail, and what is a critic's job? We'll define and discuss the types of culture writing (blogs, reviews, essays, profiles) and guidelines for each. We'll also discuss various definitions of a critic and the "unpopular opinion," as well as basics of writing a news blog about a work of art and "finding the angle" in a piece of music, film, or television.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: [Deadline.com](https://www.deadline.com)
- Reading: "[The Movie Assassin](#)," by Sarah Miller, *Popula*

7/11/24 - The elements of critical writing

What makes for constructive criticism? Being a critic isn't just about noting the positive and negative aspects of a work. We find the nuance and offer sharp points of view. Often that means crafting a thesis and narrative *for* the narrative we're dissecting. We'll examine the role of culture writing today and intersections with identity and politics. We'll also discuss what it means to think critically.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: [The Hollywood Reporter's site](https://www.therreporter.com)

WEEK 2

7/16/24 - Writing about movies

Roger & Ebert used to be the most reliable source for credible film criticism, but now you can find great voices in far out places, from the *New York Times* to The AV Club to Tumblr. We'll discuss writing voice and style (sentence structure, word choice, etc.), as well as how to watch movies for the purpose of critiquing and how to translate your views into writing. We'll also discuss how streaming outlets like Netflix, Amazon, Hulu have changed the viewing experience and expanded the range of content available to rate and review.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: [RogerEbert.com](https://www.rogerebert.com)
- Reading: "[They Review Movies on TikTok, but Don't Call Them Critics](#)," by Reggie Ugwu, *The New York Times*

Assignment #1 Due

7/18/24 - Writing about television: Reviews, recaps, and reality TV

In many ways, television has surpassed movies in content and quality, boosted by prestige TV (think *Mad Men*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*) and binge watching. Reality TV has meanwhile evolved from low-budget operations to appointment viewing (*The Bachelor*). Expanding on discussions from the previous session, we'll talk about watching movies with a critic's eye, as well as the art of the TV recap and smart ways to cover reality TV.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: Vulture.com
- Reading: *On Writing Well* “The Sound of Your Voice” Chapter
- Reading (Choose 1 or both):
 - [Vanderpump Rules Recap: Raquel, Raquel](#), by Brian Moylan, Vulture
 - Or [The Last of Us Series-Premiere Recap: Fungus Among Us](#), by Keith Phipps, Vulture

WEEK 3

7/23/24 - Tackling the music review in an age of bad music reviews

Music review writing inspires some of the most clichéd writing. We’ll discuss ways to avoid the easy music review cliché and analyze what makes a successful review, compare reviews from prominent music magazines and sites over the years, including *Rolling Stone*, *Vibe*, *Village Voice*, *Pitchfork*, and *Spin*. We’ll also listen to a few songs and discuss how we might write about them.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: Pitchfork, Rolling Stone
- Reading: [Review: Jack Harlow, Come Home the Kids Miss You](#), by Matthew Strauss, Pitchfork

Assignment #2 Due

7/25/24 - The art of a great interview

A good interview may be dependent on the subject, but the work starts with research and preparation. Concise, targeted questions and follow-ups. There are techniques helpful to interviewing famous and/or challenging subjects. We’ll discuss the art of the Q&A and why it’s not as simple as it seems. We’ll also discuss approaches to interviewing behind-the-scenes figures like producers, filmmakers, and writers.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: Entertainment Weekly’s website
- Reading: [“Allow Fiona Apple to Reintroduce Herself by Rachel Handler,”](#) Vulture

WEEK 4

7/30/24 - The fascinating and dreaded celebrity profile + Workshop Assignments

The celebrity profile has become a beast of its own. The writing many times suffers from being overly fluffy or pandering, offering little insight. But the profile can be a fun social exercise and a way to view a famous figure in a new light. We’ll talk about what the best profiles achieve. We’ll also discuss the nature of access in journalism and effects of social media on how these profiles get executed.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: GQ’s Culture section
- Reading [“Kid Cudi Is Alright”](#) by Clover Hope, *Esquire*

Assignment #3 Due

WEEK 5

8/1/24 - Feature writing and reporting + Workshop assignments

Long-form features help put the culture we consume in context and offers deeper exploration of people, ideas, and moments in entertainment. This is where you get to flex your research, voice, and critical thought. We'll discuss different forms of feature writing, from investigative reporting to reported essays and write-around profiles.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: *The New York Times* Arts and Style section online

WEEK 6

8/6/24 – Trend Pieces & Deep Dives

If you're not analyzing a cultural work through the lens of a traditional review, you might do so in the form of an essay with a specific angle. The essay is often the meat of culture writing, allowing exploration of deeper issues around race, sex, identity, and politics through the prism of entertainment. Trend pieces also function to highlight connections between works of art and dissect their relevance. What does the work (or works) tell us about society? What does the work illuminate about ourselves and our interactions?

- Read for discussion at the top of class: The New Yorker site
- Reading: "[The Unshakable Allure of the Celebrity House Tour](#)," by Bobby Finger, Vice

Final Assignment Due

8/8/24 – The Art of Pitching

No matter what kind of journalist you are -- on-staff or freelance -- before you start writing a story, you will likely have to convince an editor that it's worth pursuing. This means you have to pitch it. Sometimes a pitch is short -- just a few sentences articulating the event or idea - but often, especially with feature writing, a pitch is a project unto itself. You must indicate why the story is newsworthy and relevant to the publication's audience; how you will successfully get the information necessary to write the story; why you are the person to write the story; and the details about how long the project will take, as well as how many words the story is likely to be.

WEEK 7

8/13/24 – Guest speaker TBD

8/15/24 – Becoming an Entertainment Writer + Discussion of final assignments

Reporting and writing about entertainment involves lots of movers and shakers with different agendas. Magazine staffs coordinate profiles and interviews with publicists, managers, agents, and photographers. Production studios and PR companies make movies and TV screeners available to critics ahead of time, sometimes with embargos. There are release schedules, marketing strategies, and promotional campaigns. Behind the coverage, there's a layer of politics that can complicate the job of writing about entertainment. Writers must navigate this landscape with integrity. We'll discuss all of this, plus navigating fandom and celebrity culture. We'll discuss dealing with feedback in public, i.e. responding on social media, as well as talk about final assignments and loose ends, including the necessity of factchecking and sourcing.

Accommodations

Students with disabilities that necessitate accommodations should contact and register with New York University's Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at [212-998-4980](tel:212-998-4980) or mosescsd@nyu.edu. Information about the Moses Center can be found at www.nyu.edu/csd. The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.

Diversity & Inclusion

The Institute is committed to creating an inclusive learning environment. The Institute embraces a notion of intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions.